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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine what kinds of references to cooperative activities or collaboration appeared in the journals kept by students in a graduate methods course on the teaching of writing and if there were difference in the references made by two new teaching assistants and two experienced high school teachers. New teachers wrote their reactions to articles, class activities, and outside readings in journals. They also related what they were learning in the methods course to what they were doing and observing in other graduate classes and in the freshman composition classes they taught. Journals were collected every three weeks and their comments were responded to by the teacher-researcher. Journal entries were coded by type of activity, participants, and setting, in or out of class. Analysis of journal entries found 10 types of cooperative activities: conferences, discussions, games, journal exchanges, peer review, planning for class, professional activities, reflections on cooperative activities and collaboration, other responses to pieces of writing, and other group activities. Results indicated that (1) the four teachers' interest and involvement in cooperative activities and collaboration differed substantially; (2) not all types of activities were equally represented in the journals; (3) the participants in cooperative activities were typically teachers; (4) the journals revealed a great variety in the kinds of references teachers made to cooperative activities; and (5) there were striking differences in the kind of references to activities made by the visiting high school teachers and the new teachers. (One table is included.) (MG)

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Collaborative Learning in a Teacher Training Class: A Case Study of a Teacher-Researcher's Experience[1]

In this paper, I discuss my participation in collaborative ethnographic research in a graduate methods course in the teaching of writing at Ohio University. I hope to answer two questions: what did I as the methods course teacher learn from the study itself? And, what did I as a teacher-researcher learn from the collaborative research experience?

I begin with an analogy: twenty years ago a newly married couple invited my husband and me to Sunday brunch as the first guests in their new home. New crystal and china and silverware were on the table on top of the new linens. Coffee was perking in the new Corningware pot, and the orange juice had been freshly squeezed in the new juicer. Everything was ready, we were told, except the cinnamon nut loaves the hostess was baking. There appeared to be some problem, she told us. The centers would not bake. Frustrated and embarrassed, she finally delivered unto us the crisp ends of the loaves. A half hour later, she returned from the kitchen with new crisp ends. I swear that she returned twice more with ends of loaves, and when we left, the loaves were still in the oven, the expanding dough filling the pans--I've always imagined--again and again.

While I will not pursue this analogy further, there is, as with all stories of loaves that multiply, a point: The information that my co-researcher, Melanie Schneider (formerly in the Department of Linguistics at Ohio University), and I collected two and a half years ago has been expanding--filling filing cabinets and computer disks--just as the regenerating loaves filled the pans.

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Like the hostess, we have suffered embarrassment and frustration, lamenting a project that has taken on a life of its own--continually growing beyond our expectations.

It is not surprising that our on-going project has grown beyond our expectations, when we consider the scope of the two questions we set out to answer: How do new teachers acquire their ideas about collaborative learning? and, Can graduate methods courses promote collaborative learning? Melanie and I collected information from teacher interviews, class observations, videotaped classes, evaluations of my Fall 1987 graduate class and of the new teachers' freshman composition classes, my lesson plans, and journals written by four members of my methods course in the teaching of composition. These data have led us to write two successful grant proposals to support our study, seven presentations at conferences, and three essays submitted to composition journals.

As I have said, the larger study of which the present one is only a small part, is an ethnography of a graduate methods course. Here, however, I am limiting my discussion to what Melanie and I learned from analyzing four journals for references to cooperative activities assigned in the methods class and to collaboration between class members. In their journals, the new teachers wrote their reactions to articles, class activities, and outside readings. In addition, they were asked to relate what they were learning in the methods course to what they were doing and observing in other graduate classes and in their freshman composition classes. I collected the journals every three weeks and responded to them with written comments, reacting to statements, making suggestions, asking questions, and answering questions. Melanie and I believed that the journals could provide indirect evidence of collaborative learning through references to cooperative activities and collaboration. To that end, our analysis of the journals was guided by two questions: What kinds of references to cooperative activities or collaboration appear in the teachers' journal? and, Where there differences in the references made by two new teaching assistants and two experienced high school teachers? (The latter were part of the English Department's Visiting High

School Teaching Program.) Meeting once or twice a week for two quarters, a research assistant, Melanie, and I developed and applied a two-dimensional code that accounted for references to, for example, conferences, mentors, games, journal exchanges between the new teachers and me, planning for class. We also identified the participants in the activity referred to--for instance, did two new teachers interact? Did freshman composition students interact with their teachers? Did a graduate student interact with me?

We were surprised by the infrequency of journal references to cooperative activities assigned in the methods class. Concerned that the coding system had obscured some information, Melanie developed a new framework for describing references. This time the coding consisted of three dimensions: the type of activity, the participants, and the setting, in or out of class. We found ten types of cooperative activities: conferences, discussions, games, journal exchanges, peer review, planning for class, professional activities, reflections on cooperative activities and collaboration, other responses to pieces of writing, and other group activities. (Table 1 describes the 10 types and gives examples.)

Briefly, here is what we found when we reanalyzed the journals: first, in all the journals, the proportion of cooperative activities to total journal units ranged from 12% to 36%, indicating that the four teachers' interest and involvement in (and reporting of) cooperative activities and collaboration differed substantially. Second, as expected, not all types of activities were equally represented in the journals. Overall, the activity most frequently referred to was discussion. Other activities that averaged 10% across the journals were conferences, peer review, and those activities designed as "other." There were very few references to games and very few reflections on cooperative activities or collaboration. Third, the participants in cooperative activities were typically teachers, rather than, say, undergraduates and the teacher. Fourth, the journals revealed great variety in the kinds of references the teachers made to cooperative activities. Fifth, we also found striking differences in the kinds of references to activities made by the two pairs of teachers: the visiting

high school teachers frequently discussed professional activities, the two new teachers did not. The new teachers, as one would expect, referred most frequently to the discussions they had with peers, students, other faculty, and me.

What did I learn from our analysis of the contents of the journals that will help me teach my methods class?

For one thing, I understand the dynamics of cooperative activities better than I used to. Like many other composition teachers, I have been using cooperative activities in undergraduate writing classes and faculty workshops for decades, at first to increase motivation and more recently to promote active learning. But I had never thought of integrating cooperative activities into a class specifically to promote collaborative learning.

Members of the methods class, who were concurrently teaching freshman composition classes, regularly participated in cooperative activities in the graduate course. In fact, during the 16 class meetings in the 10-week fall quarter, 20 cooperative activities were assigned. Melanie, an outside observer, visited the class weekly. From her field notes and my class plans, we grouped the activities according to the number of participants in them: individuals who worked with a classmate's paper, pairs, small groups, and the whole class. In 14 of the 20 cases, work in pairs or small groups led to whole-class participation. For example, on one occasion, pairs of teachers discussed relationships between two sequenced assignments and shared their observations with the whole class. On another occasion, groups analyzed readers' expectations of a freshman placement essay prompt, after which the whole class assessed a sample essay in terms of the criteria in the prompt. In addition, the whole class frequently discussed assigned articles.

From analyzing the journals I learned that modeling cooperative activities will not alone ensure collaborative learning. Instead, students need to discuss the goals and results of the activities. In my class, for instance, new teachers were never specifically instructed to write about cooperative activities or collaborative learning in their journals, but Melanie and I assumed that they

would write about these topics since these activities were modeled in the methods course. They seldom did. I see now that I should have introduced the objectives of the activities and asked the new teachers to reflect upon the activities either in class or in their journals.

We found that one cooperative activity, discussion, consistently ranked as the first or second most frequent category in the journals while the frequency of other cooperative activities varied considerably among the journals. Talking about writing and the teaching of writing, it seems, takes place frequently and naturally among new teachers. A methods course, I would now argue, should provide many opportunities for discussions.

We also found that peer review, the cooperative activity most often associated with collaborative learning, did not figure highly in the four teachers' journals. Perhaps because discussion was defined as a broad category--planned and unplanned activities in and out of class in which talk was central--the teachers had many more opportunities to write about discussions than about peer review. In any case, this finding leads to two important conclusions. First, effective discussions, the no-frills staple of many composition and other classes, may be as effective a vehicle for collaborative learning as its in-vogue sisters, conferences and peer review. The point of conferences and peer review, after all, is to provide a context for constructive exchanges of ideas about the process and products of writing. While we do not wish to minimize the importance of these and other cooperative activities in graduate methods courses and in undergraduate composition classes, it is important to remind ourselves that these activities are only as good as the talk that results.

We also found that, for our subjects, out-of-class settings for cooperative activities are important. For three of the four teachers, nearly four times as many cooperative activities reported in their journals took place outside of class as inside class. Thus, we wonder if teachers and researchers are studying collaboration in the right contexts. Perhaps we should be directing our attention to the scenes of the majority of cooperative activities: teachers' offices, hallways,

cafeterias, and other way stations outside of class. You may recall that in an early argument in favor of collaborative activities in the classroom, Kenneth Bruffee pointed out that people naturally organize themselves for cooperative activity. "On campuses everywhere, right outside the classroom door," Bruffee wrote in a 1973 College English article, "students form their own academic clubs for collaborative study, organizations for self-government, 'free university' classes, social groups, film societies, political discussion groups, and activist organizations" (634). We wonder, given students' natural propensity for discussing writing and the teaching of writing outside of class, if teachers of both undergraduate and graduate classes should formalize such out-of-class opportunities for interaction? Or would building outside-of-class activities into the course undermine the students' inclination to talk about what was going on in their classes?

From our collaborative experience, what do I now know about conducting research on collaborative learning in writing classes? First, as I reported earlier, one of the questions we wanted to answer was "Do journal references to collaboration and cooperative activities differ between the two new teaching assistants and the two experienced high school teachers?" To answer this question required us to do four case studies, from which I confirmed my respect for case studies as an approach to research. In Seeing For Ourselves: Case-Study Research by Teachers of Writing, Glenda Bissex explains that case studies "enable us to see individuals as individuals; and when several individuals are compared, common traits as well as differences become apparent" (10). "While case studies," she continues, "do not provide the generalizability of large numbers of experiments that can be readily duplicated, they are more true to life in their revelations of individuals in action and their reflection of the complexities of those individuals and actions" (11). Making connections among our four case studies was one of the most productive steps in our collaboration. For instance, the journals of the veteran teachers had more references to cooperative activities and collaboration than did those of the new teachers. We speculated about the reasons for this difference: (1) After the demands of their high school situations, the

visiting high school teachers were so delighted to have the time to talk to someone about writing that they were apt to follow through on some of the discussions. (For example, the two veteran teachers collaborated on an article for publication, conducted a workshop at a state conference, and returned to their schools to do collaborative workshops for their high school colleagues.) (2) Because of their classroom experience, the veteran teachers saw the applicability of some of the cooperative activities to their own classes while the new teachers were slower to see how the activities would fit into their classes. (3) The new teachers were so overwhelmed by their day-to-day responsibilities that they didn't stray too far from their students' assigned texts. (Speculating about the results of our coding was, in fact, so illuminating that in future methods classes I will ask pairs of new teachers to collaborate on case studies of two of their students.)

The arduous tasks of developing, testing, and refining coding systems to analyze the journal entries taught me a lesson: although I continue to be impressed with the technique of content analysis, I would urge researchers to weigh the cost in time and energy such a project involves. (Three of us met weekly for two quarters.) Perhaps a coding system less specific than ours would have sufficed. Melanie and I do, however, encourage other researchers to adapt our coding system (in Table 1) to their own settings as one source of determining if--and what kinds of--opportunities for collaborative learning are in place in their curriculum. It is clear to us that the references the teachers made revealed a rich source of information about cooperative activities inside and outside of classes. Although there were commonalities among the teachers' journals, each journal reflected the personality, professional and personal concerns, and teaching style of the writer. These characteristics, in turn, influenced the teachers' attitudes towards collaboration and preferences for certain cooperative activities.

Finally, my experience as a teacher-researcher has confirmed what some research texts warn us about: a teacher-researcher can be in an uncomfortable position because of her dual roles. She is first of all the teacher of the class and must hold herself accountable for the

educational process in her classroom. Let me give an example of the kinds of problems that might arise: while we could have assigned specific journal assignments about cooperative activities and collaborative learning, we chose not to do so because we wanted to determine whether the teachers would comment on these activities on their own. From a researcher's point of view, the decision not to intervene was consistent with principles of observational research. From a teacher's point of view, however, it is clear to us that we would have increased the potential for collaborative learning if the class had discussed the goals of the cooperative activities they had participated in and if we had required the teaching assistants to reflect upon the activities in their journals. If I were to gather information from a new graduate methods class, I would make it clear that the main goal of cooperative activities is to make participants agents for change in their own attitudes about and understanding of writing and the teaching of writing and the resulting classroom practices.

It is easy to argue for collaborative studies of graduate methods courses. Teacher-researcher projects, Susan Florio and Martha Walsh conclude, "delegate the agent of change role not to an outside consultant, but to the people who...possess the most direct and explicit power and responsibility to do things in the setting" (22). In our case, as in the elementary school study Florio and Walsh describe, the researcher does not "merely acquire data in the setting and depart, not [does] she generate, in isolation, theories or treatments to apply, to manipulate the experience of class members" (22).

A teacher owes it to herself and to her students to examine her theory and her pedagogy. I don't think it is--to return to my opening analogy--a half-baked idea to argue that this is especially true for instructors of teacher training courses, since teaching assistants regularly assume the responsibility for the majority of our writing classes and are at the beginning of their socialization into the profession. Teacher-researcher projects demonstrate that the methods teacher takes the new teachers and "the ordinary business" of her teaching seriously.

Table 1. Ten Types of Cooperative Activities

1. Conferences. Meetings outside of freshman composition and graduate methods classes to discuss papers in progress.

   Example (Teacher/Student): For the first time, I can concentrate in an area that is important to me, INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCES.

2. Discussions. Activities in which talking is primary, which may take place inside or outside of classes. These include meetings with assigned mentors (experienced teachers) as well as informal discussions with other teachers.

   Example (Teacher/Teacher): Had an interesting conversation with E. today. She seems so uptight and rigid with her ideas. She wants to teacher her class formula writing and came by looking for papers to use as examples.

3. Games. Activities which are language--related but are designed to be fun and to provide a break in class routine. Some may be cooperative in some aspects and competitive in others, such as teams of students competing to generate lists of synonyms for semantically loaded words, e.g., "smashed."

   Example (Students/Students): I played E's word game with my class today. It began slowly since it took a while for the students to loosen up and trade words, but then it picked up and I got some really good sentences--some creative approaches.

4. Journal Exchanges. Exchanges in the journals between a teacher (including members of the graduate methods class) and the graduate course instructor, based on previous comments or course assignments.

   Example (Teacher/Teacher): Something you said, Betty, also made me feel better about what I used to do in the high schools--writing from literature, not about it.

5. Peer Review. Peer editing or other types of peer response, including critiques of the peer review process. For the students, peers is defined as other freshman composition students. For the four teachers, peers is defined as other graduate methods class members.

   Example 1 (Students/Students): My class did peer editing today. I learned not to have them answer the questions on the checklist in writing. I wanted them to read the discovery drafts of their partners, jot down a few notes, then talk about their observations to teach other.

   Example 2 (Teachers/Teachers): We didn't have enough time to follow each other's ideas thoroughly. You know nobody in there [graduate methods class] is going to have obvious writing problems, so I would have needed to focus and listen for one thing even more.

6. Planning for Class. Planning cooperative activities for freshman composition classes together or alone, or planning other activities for these classes together.

Example 1 (Teacher alone): I am going to try E's word game tomorrow so that I can talk about the fact that students know more than they think they do and that their vocabularies are larger than they think.

Example 2 (Teacher/Teacher): Carolyn and I devised the following library scavenger hunt sheet. We both took our classes on tours earlier and decided it was important to give them practical experience in finding things.

7. Professional Activities. References to joint planning or joint participation in professional activities outside of the freshman composition or graduate methods classes, e.g., planning a presentation for a conference or preparing a paper for publication.

Example (Teacher/Teacher): We are using a student questionnaire [for their article in preparation]. Pat will make half and I the other half.

8. Reflections on Cooperative Activities/Collaborative Learning. Reflections on cooperative activities and/or collaborative learning that take place inside or outside of classes. As self-reflections, the participant is the writer herself, coded as "self."

Example (Teacher/Teacher): Pat and I talked about the paper [their final paper for 591]. Collaboration will be an experience in itself. Areas we may explore. Assignments, draft system, class atmosphere... After we basically outline the paper, we will divide the labor.

9. Other Responses to Pieces of Writing. The four teachers' responses to comments on pieces of writing (e.g., papers, poetry, letters) made by individuals other than peers or the 591 instructor (e.g., other faculty).

Example (Teacher/Teacher): [in response to another teacher's comment on a paper] Mary--a lot of praise but said nothing we could act upon.

10. Other Group Activities. Language-related activities that take place in class other than peer review of papers or games.

Example (Teacher/Students): I am excited. My idea about 3 x 5 cards with quotations and checkbook entries worked. I read them to the class and we discussed them until the students told me what I was trying to show them with the exercises.

Prepared by Melanie Schneider and Betty Pytlik

Notes

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